



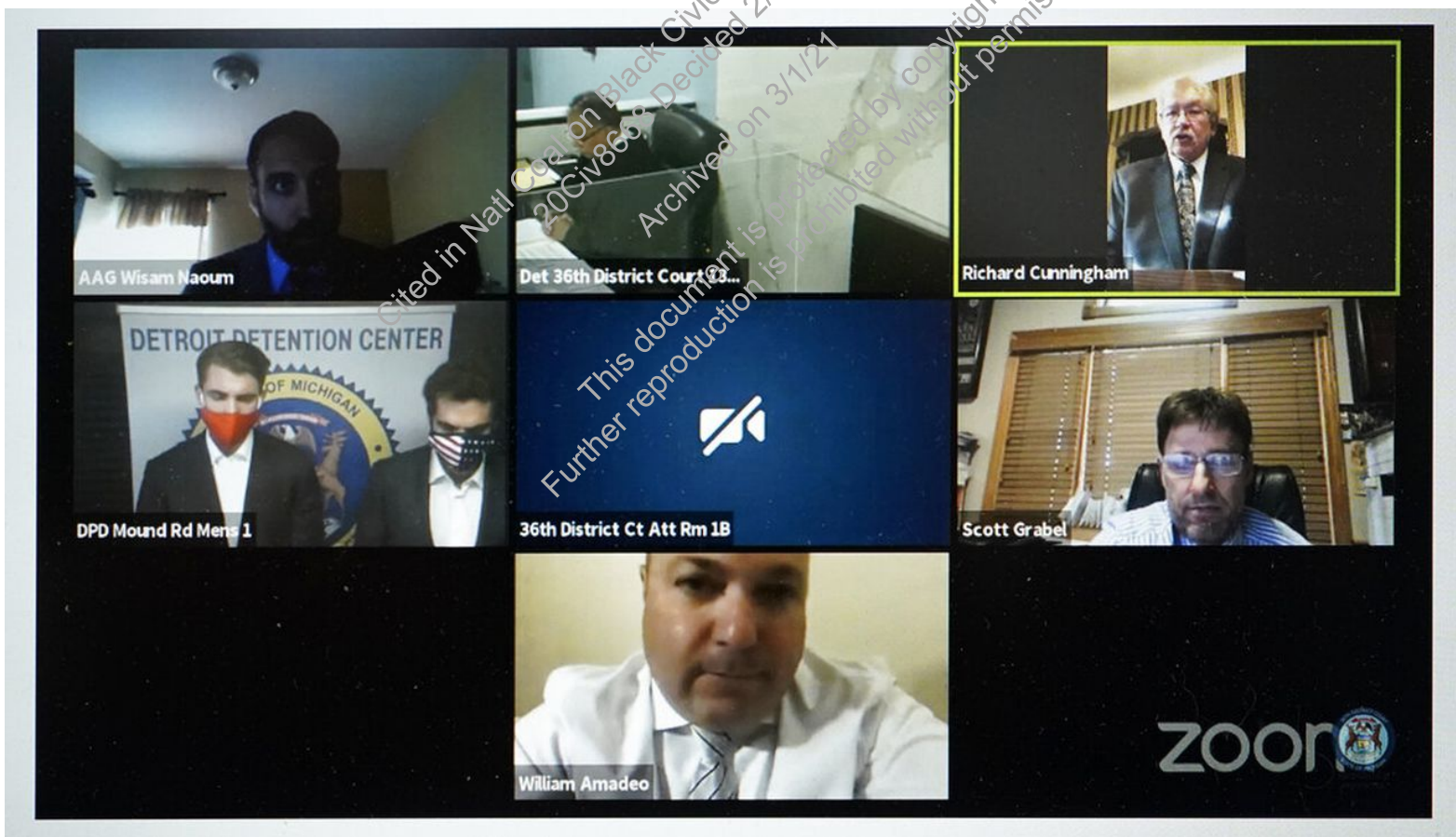
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Courts and Justice

Right-wing hoaxers Jacob Wohl and Jack Burkman hit with felony charges in Cleveland tied to multi-state voter robocall campaign

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In this screen grab from video provided by the 36th District Court in Detroit, Jacob Wohl, left, and Jack Burkman, shown in the center left photo are seen during an arraignment being conducted over Zoom on Thursday, Oct. 8, 2020 in Detroit. Burkman and Wohl turned themselves into law enforcement at the Detroit Detention Center early this morning and were arraigned on voter intimidation charges, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel announced. The duo was indicted in Cuyahoga County on Tuesday. (36th District Court/Zoom via AP) AP

By Cory Shaffer, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio – A grand jury in Cleveland on Tuesday indicted right-wing political hoaxers Jacob Wohl and Jack Burkman with felony charges connected to a multi-state robocall campaign that prosecutors say was meant to scare voters in urban areas with large minority populations out of voting by mail in the Nov. 3 presidential election.

Wohl, 22, of Irvine, California, and Burkman, 54, of Arlington, Virginia, are indicted on eight counts of telecommunications fraud and seven counts of bribery in connection with more than 8,000 calls that were placed to residents of Cleveland and East Cleveland.

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Wohl and Burkman already face similar criminal charges in Michigan and a civil lawsuit in New York City connected to the same scheme. They are free on a \$100,000 bond after pleading not guilty to charges in that state.

Cuyahoga County court records say Wohl and Burkman are expected to make their first court appearance on Nov. 13.

The charges stem from a group called Project 1599, which Wohl and Burkman founded. The caller told potential voters that police and debt-collection companies could use personal information that voters put on their mail-in ballots to track down people who have outstanding warrants and credit-card debt. The claim is not true.

The caller also falsely claimed that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control would use the information to implement mandatory vaccines.

Authorities have said that the duo made more than 85,000 calls beginning in August to residents of Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois. The calls targeting voters with area codes mostly in urban areas, with high percentages of minority and Democratic voters. Michigan, Pennsylvania and Ohio are swing states that could be critical deciders in the 2020 election between President Donald Trump and Vice President Joe Biden, and polls show close races in all three states.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's office was the first to file charges against the duo. Ohio's investigation began when U.S. Rep. Marcia Fudge, a Cleveland Democrat, and others went to Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost's office, which referred the case to prosecutors in Cuyahoga County, the Columbus Dispatch reporter earlier this month.

"The right to vote is the most fundamental component of our nation's democracy," Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Michael O'Malley said in a news release. "These individuals clearly infringed upon that right in a blatant attempt to suppress votes and undermine the integrity of this election. These actions will not be tolerated. Anyone who interferes with others' right to vote must be held accountable."

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose referenced the indictments Tuesday afternoon during an appearance on Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine's twice-weekly coronavirus address. DeWine invited LaRose on to discuss voter turnout and concerns about in-person voting.

LaRose said that his office received a tip through its voter-fraud website of "an incident of voter intimidation that was targeted particularly at the minority community," which he called a "really ugly and pernicious act of voter intimidation."

"There's a Cleveland grand jury who indicted two bad guys who are going to face justice for it," he said. "Our office played a role in helping to make sure that these people face justice. They were trying to confuse and intimidate voters. We won't tolerate it."

William Amadeo, a Michigan attorney who is part of the legal team defending Wohl and Burkman against criminal charges in that state, told [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com) Tuesday that they believe that contents of the robocall are protected speech under the First Amendment.

"I certainly don't feel my clients ever threatened anyone not to vote," he said.

Wohl and Burkman have risen to notoriety in recent years as they blundered their way through a series of public announcements of scandals later discredited.

Wohl earlier this year began circulating what he said was a copy of a lab report showing that Biden had contracted COVID-19 and had 30 days to live. Biden and his campaign dismissed the report as fraudulent.

The pair is also accused of hiring one of Wohl's ex-girlfriends to publicly accuse Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who is more popular and seen as more trustworthy on information about the pandemic than Trump, of assaulting her in a hotel in 2014. The woman later told a reporter that the accusation was false and that Wohl and Burkman paid her to levy it.

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